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Cora Rāja Sutta

The Discourse on Thieves and Kings | A 2.39

Theme: Good monks and bad monks affect one another and the world

Translated by Piya Tan ©2014

1 Sutta summary and highlights

1.0 The Cora Rāja Sutta (A 2.39) is a metaphorical discourse based on the theme of power, worldly and spiritual. The counterpoint¹ or “mirror” style of the Sutta is found in many other shorter suttas, where in the first half, usually the negative or unwholesome aspect is highlighted [§§1-6], and in the second or closing half, the positive or wholesome aspect is presented [§§7-12].

1.1 A TIME OF THIEVES

1.1.1 Thieves. In the first half of the Sutta, when thieves—a synecdoche for criminals and the immoral—are powerful, the king or social order becomes weak. This is a situation when only a few, even a single person, benefits at the cost and disadvantage of many others, so that there is widespread injustice, disorder and suffering. [§§1-6]

Similarly, in the sangha (the celibate and money-free monastic community) or the Buddhist community as a whole, when bad monastics are numerous and influential, more than the good ones, then the latter become weak and have little or no influence on the community or anywhere else. It is noteworthy that such an observation is made in the suttas themselves. This shows that such problems were real and occurred early in the history of Buddhism.² Today, long after the Buddha, the situation is worse as monastics are swept away by the world, caught up with status, power, money and pleasure just like laymen, laywomen and the worldly.³

1.1.2 Monastics as thieves

1.1.2.1 According to Buddhaghosa, going forth **outside the Buddha’s teaching** brings small gain, so one who falls away from that falls away only from mundane attainment. He meets no great suffering, just as one who falls from the back of a donkey is only covered with dust. But **the going forth in the Dharma** brings great gain—the paths, the fruits and nirvana. Thus, one who falls away from this meets great suffering, just as one who falls from the back of an elephant (MA 4:165).

Furthermore, a **monastic** who reneges on his vows or tries to change, ignore or “modernize” the unique and specialized tools for attaining the unconditioned, as such, is one who goes back on his own vow. This is not only wrong speech, but also reflects wrong practice. When such a monastic stays on, putting up a false front of what he neither upholds nor practises, he is said to be a “thief” (*cora*), since he acts stealthily, or if he acts openly, no matter how professionally or suavely (and especially so), he is not only a thief, but also a “con-monk,” “con-nun” or false monastic!⁴

¹ In music, **counterpoint** refers to the relationship between voices and sounds that are harmonically interdependent (polyphony) yet independent in rhythm and contour. In the early Buddhist texts, it is a well-known sutta use of contrast or interplay of elements in the Buddha’s teachings, giving, as a rule, a “mirror” contrast between bad and good, and other pairs of significant opposites.

² See eg **Dharma-ending age**, SD 1.10 (3+4).

³ See eg **Bad friendship**, SD 64,17.

⁴ See Susīma’s confession: **Arahatta Susīma S** (S 12.70,58), SD 16.8.

1.1.2.2 On an extreme level, **the (Arahatta) Susīma Sutta** (S 12.70) calls such a one “a thief of the Dharma” (*dhamma thena*) (one who ordains for selfish reasons and transgresses monastic rules), who would face suffering more painful than any earthly punishment, his conduct “results in more suffering, bears more bitter fruit, and it even leads one to the lower realms.”⁵

Buddhaghosa, echoing this sentiment, says that a false monk eats the country’s alms as a *thief*, while a good monk who eats without reflecting is a *debtor*, a saint on the path takes his almsfood as an *heir*, while an arhat is the *owner* of his almsfood (MA 5:32; SA 2:199).

1.1.3 The situation today. Such suttas are valuable to us, as today such problems are even more real and widespread as Buddhism and religion in general are misinterpreted and misused for sectarian, personal and worldly gains. Such a situation also conduces to the rise of cultish teachers with strange new teachings, and sectarian cults centering around such crafty, cranky and charismatic gurus.

This is where **the teacher** usurps the place of the teaching—the messenger overrides the message—so that very few actually know, practise and benefit from sutta teachings, and monastics and priests are more concerned with their religious estates, professional careers and wealth, than with *awakening* in this life or ever. Indeed, **Buddhism** then becomes fashionable and *a tool of the wealthy, powerful, eccentric and worldly*.

1.2 A TIME OF DHARMA

1.2.1 The second half presents a happier positive situation where well-behaved monks (*piya, sīla bhikkhu*) are stronger and greater in number, the bad monks have no voice—they “only sit silently in the midst of the sangha, or they depart for other places.” [§11].

Conversely, we can speak of the “silent majority.” If this silent majority comprises the good monastics, then *the bad monastics* would prevail, and society would only hear the wrong voice and have wrong views. On the other hand, when **the vocal majority** is that of the good monastics, and they do voice out the Dharma and show it in their own lives, then society will hear and heed them, and right view is more likely to prevail.

1.2.2 The imageries or metaphors of the Sutta are clear. The “thieves” (*cora*) are the bad monks [1.1.2] and **the “king”** (*rāja*) (singular) is the good monks. It is significant that “thieves” are in the *plural*: the bad monks are rarely united, except when it is to promote personal and worldly benefits. The king or rajah is in the *singular* because it refers to the good monastics as **a community**.

The good monastics, when they are one in spirit and fellowship (*samagga*), are like a good and effective king. When the king is strong, wise, good, the people prosper; when the administration is strong, wise and good, the country prospers. When the monastics are strong (keep to the Vinaya), wise (know the Dharma) and good (have inner peace and teach the Dharma), then the world prospers: “Happy is the unity [fellowship] of the sangha” (*sukhā saṅghassa sāmaggi*, Dh 194c).

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⁵ S 12.70,62/2:128 (SD 16.8).

Cora Rāja Sutta

The Discourse on Thieves and Kings

A 2.39

When the bad are powerful

- 1 Bhikshus, at a time when **thieves** [bandits] are powerful,⁶ the king is then weak.⁷
- 2 At that time, bhikshus, the king is not at ease when returning to the city or departing, or when out inspecting [supervising]⁸ the country.⁹
- 3 At that time, bhikshus, the brahmins and housemasters, too, are not at ease when returning to the city or departing, or when out attending to their work outside.¹⁰
- 4 Even so, bhikshus, at a time when bad monks are powerful, **well-behaved**¹¹ monks are then weak.¹²
- 5 At that time, bhikshus, the well-behaved monks only sit in silence¹³ in the midst of the sangha, or *they resort to the outlying country*.¹⁴
- 6 This, bhikshus, is not for the good of the many, not for the happiness of the many, not for the benefit of the people, not for the good, but for the suffering of devas and humans.¹⁵ **[69]**

⁶ Comy explains that the bad monks are “powerful” (*balavanta*) on account of being a superior [elite] faction, of great fame, regarded as merit-bringing, possessing numerous male and female supporters, and connected with the king and his ministers” (*pakkh’uttarā yas’uttarā puñña,vanto bahukehi upaṭṭhākehi ca upaṭṭhākīhi ca samannāgatā rāja,rāja.mahāmatta,sannissitā*, AA 2:142).

⁷ *Yasmim bhikkhave samaye corā balavanto honti, rājāno tasmim samaye dubbalā honti.*

⁸ Comy: Inspecting or supervising such works as building bridges, lotus lakes and pavilions (AA 2:142).

⁹ *Tasmim bhikkhave samaye rañño na phāsu hoti atiyātum vā niyyātum vā paccantime vā janapade anusaññā-tum.*

¹⁰ *Brāhmaṇa,gahapatikānam pi tasmim samaye na phāsu hoti atiyātum vā niyyātum vā bāhirāni vā kammantāni paṭivekkhitum.* Here, “outside” (*bāhira*) refers to “working in the fields in their parks outside the villages” (*bahi,-gāme ārāme khetta,kammantāni*, AA 2:142).

¹¹ “Well behaved,” *pesala* (Skt *peśāla*), glossed as “of beloved moral virtue” (*piya,sīla*, AA 2:142; SnA 475); cf “moral virtue dear to the noble ones” (*ariya,kantāni silāni*), characterizing streamwinners, eg **Pañca Vera Bhaya S 1** (S 12.41,14), SD 3.3(4.2). Spoken of monks: V 1:170, 2:241; S 1187; J 7:70; VvA 206; PvA 13, 268.

¹² *Evam evam kho bhikkhave yasmim samaye pāpa,bhikkhū balavanto honti, pesalā bhikkhū tasmim samaye dub-balā honti.* Here, “weak” (*bāla*) means “not strong” (*dubbala*) in the sense of being less assertive and influential, not in a moral sense.

¹³ “Can only sit in silence” (*tunhī,bhutā tunhī,bhūtā’va saṅkasāyanti*): usu this means meditation (M 26,4 @ SD 1.11), but here it also suggests a resigned ineffectiveness, with the repetition of *tunhī,bhūtā* and the emphatic *eva*. A similar usage, in the face of danger, is used of a tortoise, but “at ease” (*apposukko tunhī,bhūto saṅkasāyati*), a meditation imagery: **Kummōpama S** (S 35.2404 @ SD 19.17); also used of unhelpful young monks at **Nava (Bhik-khu) Bhikkhu S** (S 21.4), SD 72.13. Contrast this “silence” of the good monks against that of the bad ones at §11 below. On the noble silence, see SD 44.1 (4).

¹⁴ *Tasmim bhikkhave samaye pesalā bhikkhū tunhī,bhūtā tunhī,bhūtā’va saṅgha,majjhe saṅkasāyanti* [Ke saṅ-kamma jhāyanti; Se sañjhāyanti] *paccantime vā janapade bhajanti* [So Be; Ce Ee Ke Se; Be *acchanti*].

¹⁵ *Tay-idam bhikkhave hoti bahu.janāhitāya bahu.janāsukhāya bahuno janassa anattāya ahitāya dukkhāya deva,manussānam.*

When the good are strong

7 Bhikshus, at a time when **the king is powerful**, *the thieves are then weak*.

8 At that time, bhikshus, the king is at ease when returning to the city or departing, or when out inspecting the country.

9 At that time, bhikshus, the brahmins and housemasters, too, are at ease when returning to the city or departing, or when attending to their work outside.

10 Even so, bhikshus, at a time when **well-behaved monks** are strong, *bad monks* are then weak.

11 At that time, bhikshus, the bad monks only sit silently¹⁶ in the midst of the sangha, or on this or that account (or leave for various places).¹⁷

12 This, bhikshus, is for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the benefit of the people, for the good, for the happiness of devas and humans.

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¹⁶ On this uncharacteristic usage of “silence,” see **Silence and the Buddha**, SD 44.1 (1.1.6.1).

¹⁷ *Tasmim bhikkhave samaye pāpa, bhikkhū tuṇhī, bhūtā tuṇhī, bhūtāva saṅgha, majjhe saṅkasāyanti yena vā pana tena papatanti* [So Ce Ee Ke Se; Be *pakkamanti*]. “Fall” prob alludes to falling from the training, ie, either committing serious offences or giving up the training (on account of not materially profiting from “renunciation”). Comy uses *papatati* (to fall) in the sense of one wrongly learning the meditation formulas (the 32 body-parts) is one who falls from a 32-rung ladder through a misstep (KhpA 70).